論 文

Reading Sylvia Plath:
Does knowing about an artist help us appreciate their work?

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Abstract: The approach that we typically take to art, in the unexamined position, is one that posits that appreciation should be based on a correct understanding and interpretation of the artwork in question. Here I argue that as non-specialists we ought rather to begin from an emotive and personal response to the work and in that way base our appreciation not on knowledge but on phenomenology. To make this case three poems from Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* collection (1965) are examined. As Plath wrote confessional poetry a short biography is provided and the selected poems are set against what we know of her life and thus what the poems may ostensively mean, with each poem being progressively less transparent. Within this context of decreasing knowledge the question of appreciation is raised and some potential benefits of a personally emotional and time-specific comportment towards art are offered.

Keywords: art appreciation; knowing about art; Sylvia Plath; understanding art

1. Appreciation-understanding-interpretation: Framing the argument, finding the author

Appreciation, understanding, and interpretation are often blurred together when we talk with others about a work of art or even just approach one for ourselves. We tend to assume that everything about it has a meaning – a singular meaning, usually – and that by knowing that meaning we are able to understand and therefore properly appreciate the work. Without knowing about the artist's intentions, or sometimes also such background information as school, style, influences, historical setting, etc., we think that we are missing out on something important and that missing out thereby hinders us in our appreciative efforts. Without knowledge, this line of thought goes, we simply cannot succeed, cannot really relate to the artwork or apply it to our lives. In the below I want to make the case for not knowing, and I also want to put forward that we really ought to think of appreciation in purely personal terms. To make this argument we will examine three of Sylvia Plath's poems all taken from the posthumously published collection *Ariel* (1965): 'Daddy', 'Lady Lazarus', and 'Tulips'. Prior to that examination, however, I will proceed to ruin the main point of my argument beforehand by sharing some details of the author's life which are often taken to be pertinent to understanding her poetry. I will do this in order to show how appreciation is not understanding is not interpretation and how a differing approach than the standard one is arguably preferable. Plath of course wrote confessional poetry, particularly in her later work of which the *Ariel* collection is composed; I have chosen her for

this reason as the fact of the poetry being confessional purposefully complicates the issue and makes my endeavor all the more difficult. If the thoughts I wish to promote can apply even to confessional writing then surely they can apply very broadly indeed. Or so my thinking on the matter goes; I leave it up to the reader to decide on that.

Prior to giving some details about Plath's life we must first get clear on the trio of terms that I asserted are often jumbled together in our minds: appreciation, understanding, and interpretation. As the latter two are typically considered to be objective in some sense we can offset them from the first term in order to try and arrive at a more precise conception of each as they pertain to how we conduct ourselves towards art. Let us begin with understanding. To understand a work of art is usually taken to involve an awareness of both the artist's intentions regarding the piece and an ability to situate it in the proper art historical context. This is clearly an epistemic issue and an epistemic issue alone. When we say that we 'get' – roughly interchangeable with 'understand' in everyday language – a certain painting, poem, book, what have you, we do not however mean that we understand it in this sense, rather we mean that we (think we) are on the same plane, as it were, as the work's creator vis-à-vis the piece in question. That is an emotive statement and is not about understanding in the sense in which it is directed at art (but which I think, for reasons that will be given below, is closer to the mark). Similarly for interpretation, with regards to which we tend to dichotomize the concept into fully-and-solely correct on the one hand and simply wrong on the other. We then assign the 'true meaning' of a work to that correct interpretation and take it that whatever one may think or feel when one interacts with the work might be well and good but it will not be 'right' unless it matches that particular meaning. It is true that we will sometimes make use of phrases such as 'I interpret it to mean…' to introduce a personal opinion regarding a piece of art but everyone understands the actual function of such language and (typically) does not take the speaker to be asserting that her interpretation is the correct one. Again, this is an epistemic matter but it goes beyond understanding in insisting that one align oneself with it if one wishes to be in the right. We can understand everything about a piece and still get its interpretation wrong – on this view – if we are somehow in error about the artist's purport in the assigned intentions. (Confused? Me too, for to accept all of these background and implicit assumptions that we do is a confusing way to think about art. How can an artist's – or anyone's – intentions about anything be known to the degree that this mode of thinking seems to demand?) Appreciation, finally, is thought to relate to both having an adequate understanding and to possess the accurate interpretation. If we can achieve that degree of knowledge, and again it is assumed that knowledge is all that is involved, then we are in a position to really appreciate the piece and to let it speak to us in the properly defined way that it can or should. This is a strictured and structured point of view and I wish to make my case against it not by attacking the fact or necessity of the epistemic side but rather via the sole acknowledgedly emotional aspect of the triad: appreciation. I will do this in bits and pieces in the sections below through considered reactions to the selected poems. I admit that I may be quite wrong in the foregoing characterization of the unexamined position and in the features of it that I delineated, but even if that is the case I think that what I will have to say about appreciating works of art will still be applicable and perhaps even valuable.

Finally, as remarked, some details about Plath's life.[1] She was born on 27 October 1932, in a Boston neighborhood to a second-generation American mother of Austrian extraction and a father who immigrated to the United States from Germany in 1900 when he was fifteen years old. Plath's father became a biology professor at Boston University and specialized in entomology. Shortly after Plath turned eight her father died of complications related to a foot amputation that became necessary due to untreated diabetes. Plath was close to her mother but their relationship seems to have been complicated as Plath's scorching poem 'Medusa',[2] which ends with the line 'There is nothing between us', was purportedly written about her. (Plath's mother edited and published a collection of their correspondence titled *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950-1963* in 1975.[3]) Plath wrote actively from an early age and achieved her first publication in a national newspaper shortly after she had finished high school. At university she continued writing and editing and did well academically, obtaining a scholarship to continue her studies at Cambridge University after graduating from Smith College in 1955 (located in Northampton, Massachusetts, USA). Plath suffered from depression and attempted suicide a number of times during her short life, the first of which was in 1953 when she was just twenty years-old; she was found in a crawl space under the family home after overdosing on sleeping pills and remaining there for three days. Following that Plath was committed to a program of psychiatric care and was thought for a while to have recovered. Then in 1956, while on her scholarship at Cambridge, Plath met the English poet Ted Hughes, beginning what would be a seven year relationship, marriage, and the birth of two children together, a girl and a boy. The couple separated in the autumn of 1962 due to infidelity on Hughes' part and Plath moved herself and the children into a new home. Early in the morning on 11 February 1963, Plath took her own life by placing her head in the kitchen oven in order to cause hypoxia, taking care to seal off the room to protect her sleeping children who were by then nearly three and just over one year old (a nurse was also scheduled to visit later that morning). The months prior to her death had been a very productive period for Plath and most of the poems in her *Ariel* collection were written during that period in addition to her only novel, *The Bell Jar*,[4] having been published in January of that year.

2. Reading 'Daddy'

In this section and the two following I will first present the poem in question so that the reader may experience it for herself. I will then draw some conclusions on possible meanings that can be read, or read into, the poem based on the short biographical sketch given above and consider how such knowledge affects our appreciation of the poem itself. Throughout these discussions I will attempt to add some theoretical reflections that may have bearing

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[1] There are many good biographies and other books examining Plath and her life but a general picture can be garnered from her Wikipedia page: 'Sylvia Plath', *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia.* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sylvia_Plath>. Accessed 17 November 2016.

[2] Found in Sylvia Plath, *Ariel* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1965), 38-39.

[3] Sylvia Plath, *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950-1963,* sel., ed., and comm.. by Aurelia Schober Plath (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1975).

[4] Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (London: Heinemann, 1963). The book was published under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas.

on our artistic experiences, and relate them, as well as I can, to the topic at hand.

'Daddy'

[1] You do not do, you do not do
Any more, black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.

[2] Daddy, I have had to kill you.
You died before I had time –
Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
Ghastly statue with one grey toe
Big as a Frisco seal

[3] And a head in the freakish Atlantic
Where it pours bean green over blue
In the waters off beautiful Nauset.
I used to pray to recover you.
Ach, du.

[4] In the German tongue, in the Polish town
Scraped flat by the roller
Of wars, wars, wars.
But the name of the town is common.
My Polack friend

[5] Says there are a dozen or two.
So I never could tell where you
Put your foot, your root,
I never could talk to you.
The tongue stuck in my jaw.

[6] It stuck in a barb wire snare.

Ich, ich, ich, ich,

I could hardly speak.

I thought every German was you.

And the language obscene

[7] An engine, an engine

Chuffing me off like a Jew.

A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.

I began to talk like a Jew.

I think I may well be a Jew.

[8] The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna

Are not very pure or true.

With my gypsy ancestress and my weird luck

And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack

I may be a bit of a Jew.

[9] I have always been scared of *you*,

With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.

And your neat moustache

And your Aryan eye, bright blue.

Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You –

[10] Not God but a swastika

So black no sky could squeak through.

Every woman adores a Fascist,

The boot in the face, the brute

Brute heart of a brute like you.

[11] You stand at the blackboard, daddy,

In the picture I have of you,

A cleft in your chin instead of your foot

But no less a devil for that, no not

Any less the black man who

[12] Bit my pretty red heart in two.
I was ten when they buried you.
At twenty I tried to die
And get back, back, back to you.
I thought even the bones would do.

[13] But they pulled me out of the sack,
And they stuck me together with glue.
And then I knew what to do.
I made a model of you,
A man in black with a Meinkampf look

[14] And a love of the rack and the screw.
And I said I do, I do.
So daddy, I'm finally through.
The black telephone's off at the root,
The voices just can't worm through.

[15] If I've killed one man, I've killed two –
The vampire who said he was you
And drank my blood for a year,
Seven years, if you want to know.
Daddy, you can lie back now.

[16] There's a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always *knew* it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.[5]

Just knowing the little bit about Plath and her father that we do from the above information we can draw what are ostensibly some clear parallels between the facts of the matter, so to speak, and Plath's expression of them via her

[5] Plath 1965, *op. cit.*, 48-50; stanza numbering inserted.

poem. To begin with, in the first stanza Plath writes of living in a shoe like a foot for thirty years, and as we know that most of the poems in the collection were written by her at the age of thirty we may assume that she is referring to her own body; living 'like a foot...poor and white' in the 'black shoe' of her body which 'do[es] not do'. Here is the first instance of 'black' in the poem, a color that is repeated often throughout and which tends to elicit in the reader's mind the typical Western cultural associations of evil, darkness, foreboding, and the like (a fact often, and rightly I think, commented on in discussions of racial issues). Plath contrasts herself with her body both by the white/black distinction and by the foot/shoe discussion, reinforcing an image of a pure and innocent (white) self unjustly trapped in a defective and menacing (black) body. Since we know that Plath tried to commit suicide a number of times in her life can we infer that her attempts were efforts at somehow escaping her body? We might, but such speculation seems to stretch what is actually written and given Plath's frequent associations of body and self even just within this poem (through descriptions of and allusions to her father's and her own) it does seem that that particular conclusion is unwarranted. Thinking that it could be what Plath was trying to do though highlights the danger of singular 'proper meanings' and 'correct interpretations' that a bit of knowledge seems to tempt us towards.

The references to her father's toe and early death both continue the foot/shoe imagery and cause us to think of his amputation and the resulting complications. For any child to lose a parent at eight years old would be devastating; the child is just old enough to understand the loss itself and the depth of the loss involved but not yet old enough to be equipped to deal with it in any remotely mature way. Yet here in the twelfth stanza Plath refers to his being buried when she was ten years old, not eight. It seems a safe assumption that the elder Plath's body was not kept from burial for two years and so the errant figure in the poem must have been put there for reasons other than historical accuracy. What might those reasons be? In chasing them down we find ourselves getting further and further away from the poem and the effect that its words have on us. If we simply do not know how old Plath was when her father died, or even that her father died while she was very young at all, then when we begin to read this poem we will not get caught up in such details and will arguably be the better for it; we will be the better situated to just read the poem and let the power of Plath's words work their appreciative effects on us.

Similarly are the multiple references to her father's being German, the German language, the Nazis, and the Holocaust. If we know that her father immigrated to the United States in 1900 when he was fifteen then we find ourselves wondering just why Plath made such an effort to paint the war-bound picture that she does. Was her father a Nazi sympathizer living in the US and watching Hitler's rise from afar? As he died in 1940 when Plath herself was so very young what could she have known about such things? Years later did her mother and she discuss her father's political persuasions? What was his position regarding Germany during World War I? We may also find ourselves thinking that to assert Nazi-hood upon her father's memory in this way is entirely unfair and assumes that German equals Nazi, which is surely a gross stereotype at best and at worst outright ethnic hatred of

the very same type that the Nazis themselves employed. At any rate, the poem once more has a much better effect if we know nothing of her father's alleged or real politics and even background as an immigrant and just take the words for the feel that they create in us of Plath associating herself with the mistreatment of a Jewish person at the hands of the Nazis. Naturally however harsh or horrible Plath's father might have been towards his daughter would almost certainly not compare with the truly horrific treatment that was meted out on Jewish groups in Germany and Occupied Europe but the language is effective in how it draws us into her personally perceived suffering and we can readily guess how wretched she must have felt to express herself in this way. In writing on H. P. Lovecraft's use of alluding to the unstated, to the unstateable, in order to create a certain mood or sense in the reader Graham Harman asserts that such a literary technique has the strength it does due to its letting the reader's imagination fill in the blanks.[6] Here we have something close to the opposite of that as every educated adult reading this poem will know of the horrors the Nazis committed even if that knowledge is limited to the intellectual and empathic spheres and she or he has not personally experienced any of it in even the very indirect way that a visit to Auschwitz or the Holocaust Museum might engender. There are very few blanks to be filled in; there is only the understanding of how we presume Plath must have felt about her childhood, or anyway aspects of her childhood, in light of how she wrote about it. Knowing the actual history of her father can make us miss this point as we get distracted with the type of 'what-if' musings I referred to above and thereby reduce our appreciation of what the poet is communicating.

The same line of thought as the immediately above can be applied to the fifteenth stanza and its 'If I've killed one man, I've killed two – /The vampire who said he was you/And drank my blood for a year,/Seven years, if you want to know.' If we are familiar with Plath's personal life we will assign this mentally as a reference to her seven year relationship with Ted Hughes and either leave it at that or make the additional short interpretive step that asserts that we can confidently think she associated Hughes with her father in vague or direct ways and perhaps even tried to make of Hughes a father-figure in some form. If we do that though we will miss out on the symbolic meanings that the number seven holds for us culturally, its nuances of perfection and completion, and how if understood in that way the 'seven years' shifts from a literal span of time to a figurative fullness, an exhaustive victimization of Plath at the hands of the referenced two men (whomever they were) in her life whom she then revenged herself upon by 'killing' them.

In all of the above ways we find that a bit of knowledge, which purportedly leads to a better understanding of the work, 'the' correct interpretation of the work, and therefore a deeper and/or more legitimate appreciation of the work, actually threatens to lead us astray and away from what is being artistically expressed. In a discussion of Book III of G. W. F. Hegel's *Aesthetik* (1885), E. F. Carritt writes that for Hegel a poem has three separate aesthetic

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[6] Graham Harman, *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2012).

elements: 1) its subject matter, 2) its form or presentation, and 3) its verbal expression.[7] Carritt then extrapolates from this with, 'If we wished to justify Hegel's triple analysis which results in the conception of certain bare facts being "poetical" (or rather aesthetic) as distinguished from others which are not, I suppose we might say that human emotions are the poetic facts.'[8] I think this raises a very apposite concern when it comes to appreciating a work of art: at a certain point rational analysis or even analytic methodology simply fails and we find ourselves far better off, at least when it comes to appreciation, attempting to feel our way into a work, to let it get under our skin and to conjure within us the emotional response that it clearly is itself an expressive form of. This entails, amongst other things, the cessation of attempts at understanding the piece's 'real' meaning or 'true' interpretation (although the more personal interpretation of 'I take this to mean…' would still of course apply) and instead focuses on one's own internal and emotive response to the artwork. Such must perforce differ widely for each individual and even from time to time within an individual's life as she returns to the piece at varying points and from various contexts and situations. If we can apply an approach like this then we free the art to fully be what it will be at that specific instance of its being rather than assigning to it some static and immutable monolithic imprint. Appreciation, on this view, allows a work of art to be every bit as human as its creator, and that quite naturally involves ceaseless fluctuation and flow.

3. Reading 'Lady Lazarus'

A poem which has fewer obvious biographical connections, at least on the brief outline of Plath's life given above, but which has been celebrated no less than 'Daddy' is 'Lady Lazarus'. Our exploration into a non-epistemic method of appreciation will therefore continue with it.

'Lady Lazarus'

[1] I have done it again.
One year in every ten
I manage it –

[2] A sort of walking miracle, my skin
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
My right foot

[3] A paperweight,

[7] E. F. Carritt, 'Art without Form? A Question Prior to an Aesthetic of Poetry', *Philosophy,* 16:61 (1941), 19-26.
[8] *ibid.,* p. 26.

My face a featureless, fine

Jew linen.

[4] Peel off the napkin

O my enemy.

Do I terrify? –

[5] The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?

The sour breath

Will vanish in a day.

[6] Soon, soon the flesh

The grave cave ate will be

At home on me

[7] And I a smiling woman.

I am only thirty.

And like the cat I have nine times to die.

[8] This is Number Three.

What a trash

To annihilate each decade.

[9] What a million filaments.

The peanut-crunching crowd

Shoves in to see

[10] Them unwrap me hand and foot –

The big strip tease.

Gentlemen, ladies

[11] These are my hands

My knees.

I may be skin and bone,

[12] Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman.
The first time it happened I was ten.
It was an accident.

[13] The second time I meant
To last it out and not come back at all.
I rocked shut

[14] As a seashell.
They had to call and call
And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.

[15] Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.

[16] I do it so it feels like hell.
I do it so it feels real.
I guess you could say I've a call.

[17] It's easy enough to do it in a cell.
It's easy enough to do it and stay put.
It's the theatrical

[18] Comeback in broad day
To the same place, the same face, the same brute
Amused shout:

[19] 'A miracle!'
That knocks me out.
There is a charge

[20] For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge
For the hearing of my heart –
It really goes.

[21] And there is a charge, a very large charge
For a word or a touch
Or a bit of blood

[22] Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.
So, so, Herr Doktor
So, Herr Enemy.

[23] I am your opus,
I am your valuable,
The pure gold baby

[24] That melts to a shriek.
I turn and burn.
Do not think I underestimate your great concern.

[25] Ash, ash –
You poke and stir.
Flesh, bone, there is nothing there –

[26] A cake of soap,
A wedding ring,
A gold filling.

[27] Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware.

[28] Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.[9]

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[9] Plath 1965, *op. cit.,* 8-11; stanza numbering inserted.

Knowing that Plath attempted suicide a number of times in her life the first, seventh, and eighth stanzas immediately make us think that this poem was written after, and about, a suicide attempt at the age of thirty. The seventh and eighth stanzas are quite explicit in this ('I am only thirty./And like the cat I have nine times to die./This is Number Three./What a trash/To annihilate each decade.'), the first stanza hints at it with its opening 'I have done it again', while the following 'One year in every ten' calls to mind her sleeping pill overdose and being found lying beneath the family home. Assuming that this topic (also broadly hinted at by the title) must be the poem's area of concern we find that the lines 'The first time it happened I was ten./It was an accident' in the twelfth stanza surprise us. Did Plath 'accidentally' try to commit suicide at ten years old? What would it mean to 'accidentally' do something like that? Did she simply take a needless risk while at play and was scolded by her mother for 'trying to kill herself'? Again such thoughts are a distraction and disrupt the emotional flow the author has established in detailing her long-term and continually tragic dance with an early death; if we allow our minds to trail off after them we find our appreciation of the piece waning. The next two stanzas, however, and potentially contrary to the central argument of this paper, might seem to be aided by some knowledge of the events they are likely describing. Let us look at them again (the thirteenth and fourteenth stanzas):

The second time I meant
To last it out and not come back at all.
I rocked shut

As a seashell.
They had to call and call
And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.

If we know that Plath spent three days largely unconscious in a crawl space then these lines are particularly vivid in their description of 'rock[ing] shut' and of those who found her having to 'pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.' The image of maggots is called to mind and the effect is quite grotesque, quite striking. If, on the other hand, we do not know about Plath spending three days partially exposed in an immobile and sedative state then how might we encounter these lines? Any number of responses in the reader might be generated but given the power of the imagery combined with the poem's title, allusions to decaying flesh (the fifth and six stanzas), line about 'nine times to die' (seventh stanza), and references to mummy-like wrappings (the fourth, tenth, and eleventh stanzas), all of which precede the two stanzas under discussion, little would be lost on the reader who was not aware of the specific details of her life. The emotional impact and potency of Plath's words do not depend on anything outside of the language itself and so arguably even the slight transparency that knowing about the episode when Plath was twenty might provide does not significantly impact how we may appreciate this work or what we may take from it.

Considering the abovementioned lines about mummy-like wrappings is in itself an instructive undertaking for an appreciation that is based on a personal emotional interaction with the text. In a groundbreaking work Roman Ingarden argued that a literary work of art ought to be viewed as an intentional object rather than as a physical object (that is, a book, say, is an artistic object while the potential aesthetic object arises from it, ontologically situated with regards to the interaction between the reader and the text), and as such – being mind-dependent – the artwork contains compositional 'strata' of real and ideal components, allowing for layers of meaning and for the reader to fill in, in her own mind, incomplete or indeterminate parts.[10] Such a view is again counter to the notion of a single 'correct' interpretation that could be found and affixed to each specific piece, and Ingarden's theoretical approach moreover places just as much focus on the consumer of the art as on the producer; it is the give and take between the reader and the author's actual words (not, importantly, between the reader and the author herself) that is paramount. Given the short biography of Plath above (if that is all we know about her life), we simply do not know if she ever underwent a procedure that involved wrappings of the type described or if Plath included those details only in reference to the New Testament story of Lazarus;[11] we do not know, do not need to know, and in my view do not (should not) even want to know. From a blank epistemic position we may imagine her in hospital undergoing a treatment that requires such and responding to that treatment in the way she details in her poem, or alternatively we may mentally place her in a tomb in the Israeli countryside and picture her suddenly sitting up, resurrected, and unwrapping her grave clothes à la Lazarus; however we imagine it by doing so we find that we are drawn deeper and deeper into the work and Plath's shockingly expressed sense of herself as being a creature alive while dead, a Lazarus-mummy watching herself decompose, fade, be cremated (possibly; the twenty-fourth through twenty-sixth stanzas infer this but again the individual reader ought to decide), and then rise again phoenix-like, Lady Lazarus herself.

One final consideration on this point of reader-text interaction; in his paper Carritt quotes a passage of Helen Keller's poetry that reads as follows:

The forest trees have donned
Their gorgeous autumn tapestries,
A mysterious hand is silently stripping the trees.
And with rustle and whirr the leaves descend
And, like little frightened birds,
Lie trembling on the ground.[12]

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[10] Roman Ingarden, *The Literary Work of Art: An Investigation on the Borderlines of Ontology, Logic, and Theory of Literature*, trans. by George G. Grabowicz, for. by David Michael Levin (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973); see also Tiger C. Roholt, *Key Terms in Philosophy of Art* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

[11] The story can be found in the Gospel of John 11:1-44.

[12] Carritt, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

Keller of course was both blind and deaf, the results of an illness she contracted at a mere nineteen months old.[13] Given her condition then we find that we cannot comprehend how she herself would have understood the imagery and the sounds that she invokes in her writing here; being able to see and hear we are entirely incapable of realizing how Keller could have related to the world for even if we try to guess what it would be like not to have sight and hearing we do so from a standpoint of taking away our own, of deleting the known, which is a far cry from the never known. This inevitable failure on our part, this incapability, thus appears to block any attempts we might make for a 'correct' (author-based) understanding or interpretation. Yet nevertheless we must admit a real beauty to the lines from our own point of view having seen such scenery and heard such noises and it is there – internally, for us as us experiencing the poem from our emotional standpoint – where a truly meaningful appreciation can be found.

4. Reading 'Tulips'

The final and most epistemically opaque, at least on the biographical outline given in the first section, poem that we will consider from *Ariel* is 'Tulips'. As we cannot imagine exactly what background Plath may have been writing about, if indeed she was writing about any specific event at all (but given that she typically wrote confessional poetry we may think it likely that she was), 'Tulips' will stand as a kind of final test case for our argument that appreciation of a work is better placed in one's personal engagement and response to it than in an analytically arrived at understanding and/or interpretation, however objective such an analysis is presumed to be.

'Tulips'

[1] The tulips are too excitable, it is winter here.
Look how white everything is, how quiet, how snowed-in
I am learning peacefulness, lying by myself quietly
As the light lies on these white walls, this bed, these hands.
I am nobody; I have nothing to do with explosions.
I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses
And my history to the anaesthetist and my body to surgeons.

[2] They have propped my head between the pillow and the sheet-cuff
Like an eye between two white lids that will not shut.
Stupid pupil, it has to take everything in.

[13] 'Helen Keller', *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia.* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Keller>. Accessed 30 November 2016.

The nurses pass and pass, they are no trouble,
They pass the way gulls pass inland in their white caps,
Doing things with their hands, one just the same as another,
So it is impossible to tell how many there are.

[3] My body is a pebble to them, they tend it as water
Tends to the pebbles it must run over, smoothing them gently.
They bring me numbness in their bright needles, they bring me sleep.
Now I have lost myself I am sick of baggage –
My patent leather overnight case like a black pillbox,
My husband and child smiling out of the family photo;
Their smiles catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks.

[4] I have let things slip, a thirty-year-old cargo boat
Stubbornly hanging on to my name and address.
They have swabbed me clear of my loving associations.
Scared and bare on the green plastic-pillowed trolley
I watched my teaset, my bureaus of linen, my books
Sink out of sight, and the water went over my head.
I am a nun now, I have never been so pure.

[5] I didn't want any flowers, I only wanted
To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty.
How free it is, you have no idea how free –
The peacefulness is so big it dazes you,
And it asks nothing, a name tag, a few trinkets.
It is what the dead close on, finally; I imagine them
Shutting their mouths on it, like a Communion tablet.

[6] The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me.
Even through the gift paper I could hear them breathe
Lightly, through their white swaddlings, like an awful baby.
Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds.
They are subtle: they seem to float, though they weigh me down,
Upsetting me with their sudden tongues and their colour,

A dozen red lead sinkers round my neck.

7] Nobody watched me before, now I am watched.
The tulips turn to me, and the window behind me
Where once a day the light slowly widens and slowly thins,
And I see myself, flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow
Between the eye of the sun and the eyes of the tulips,
And I have no face, I have wanted to efface myself.
The vivid tulips eat my oxygen.

8] Before they came the air was calm enough,
Coming and going, breath by breath, without any fuss.
Then the tulips filled it up like a loud noise.
Now the air snags and eddies round them the way a river
Snags and eddies round a sunken rust-red engine.
They concentrate my attention, that was happy
Playing and resting without committing itself.

9] The walls, also, seem to be warming themselves.
The tulips should be behind bars like dangerous animals;
They are opening like the mouth of some great African cat,
And I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes
Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me.
The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea,
And comes from a country far away as health.[14]

The medical terminology in the first stanza, together with 'lying' and 'this bed', immediately places the author as a patient in hospital in our minds. But where, why, and for what treatment? We have no clues, although the line that includes 'I have nothing to do with explosions' is an enigmatic one that sets our minds racing for events that may have been contemporaneous to London in 1962 or 1963; if nothing comes to mind we might search the internet and find the Battersea Explosion[15] – was that what Plath meant? Alas we are again chasing our tails and taking

[14] Plath 1965, *op. cit.*, 12-14; stanza numbering inserted.
[15] 'Battersea Explosion 1962', *British Pathé.* <http://www.britishpathe.com/video/battersea-explosion/query/gas>. Accessed 07 December 2016. The date given on the website for the newsreel relaying the event (gas cylinders suddenly exploded damaging a depot, affecting rail travel, and causing police to temporarily evacuate the area) is 11 October 1962.

ourselves both mentally and emotionally out of the poem.

Returning to the words themselves, the second and the third stanzas continue the hospital imagery with their intriguing references to seemingly numberless nurses and to being treated as a pebble is by water: smoothing, smoothing, smoothing. The fourth stanza gives us an age ('I have let things slip, a thirty-year-old cargo boat') and a baptismal metaphor with its 'Sink out of sight, and the water went over my head./I am a nun now, I have never been so pure' that is preceded by a 'green plastic-pillowed trolley'. Is Plath referring to being overwhelmed to the point of needing to be physically carried out of her home on a stretcher and then away by ambulance, as might seem more likely, or does she mean that she has been bathed by the staff? It hardly matters and we do not dwell on the question for the following stanza opens by introducing the titular flowers to us and we picture her lying in bed in a white room with the sheets pulled up and a vase of tulips on a table or stand near her. The sixth, seventh, and eighth stanzas then describe the violence those tulips do to her, their aggressiveness, their menace, their unending threat and demand to be acknowledged, to be recognized. In the final stanza we find judgment of them ('The tulips should be behind bars like dangerous animals'), but also seemingly hope ('And I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes/Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me'); Plath's heart has not given up on her and, we suspect, she has not either and will find the 'country far away' of health.

As we finish reading the poem we may be tempted to reflect on its 'thirty-year-old' phrase and put together that whatever hospital stay this poem might be about it took place shortly before her death, thereby placing Plath into the context we have and wondering if it mustn't have come shortly before or around her thirtieth birthday in the autumn of 1962 as that was the season when she split with Hughes yet here we still have 'My husband and child smiling out of the family photo' (third stanza; but why not 'children?' Another distraction.); as before though such reflections do little to help us appreciate the work she has built and entirely ruin the climatic series of lines regarding the flowers that were considered so central by the writer that the poem's title is simply their name. It is the relationship that Plath has with the flowers that is what really matters here, and the telling, the expression, of that relationship requires no background context whatsoever. All we need to appreciate how Plath felt at the time, and how – if we allow it – we can come to feel in reading her work is the knowledge that tulips are a kind of flower (which the poem itself tells us if we happen not to know: the fifth stanza starts with 'I didn't want any flowers' which are thereafter referred to by their proper name), that flowers are often placed in hospital rooms, and that Plath is in such a room. This is a very limited sort of knowledge as compared with what we assumed for the prior two poems and it is also a very general sort of knowledge. It is, moreover, the cultural sort of knowledge that is grounded in the systems of reference that words and images mentally form for us all the time in complete automaticity and without any effort involved; any reader of English might confidently be expected to have such qualifying associations. We do not really know when, where, or why Plath was in hospital and yet we have all we need to feel our way into this poem and imagine ourselves being threatened by flowers placed there within eyesight

to please and calm us; what would it be like to have that kind of sensation, to think those kinds of thoughts? We dive in to our own past experiences with such feelings and, possibly, situations and we ruminate on what it must be for that type of paranoia to take hold, to ever actually be threatened by flowers. Or is it some union the flowers bear that threatens us? Perhaps the giver of the flowers, who is inevitably brought to mind by the mere sight of them, is the real threat? Now we find ourselves in the world *of* the poem and not in a world *about* the poem or in one that the poem itself is thought to be 'about'; now we have felt our way in.

Through focusing our appreciative efforts on our own personal and emotional engagement with the text, an engagement that is purposefully disconnected from finding or even seeking an objective or accurate or potentially author intended hermeneutical analysis, we open up the text for its language to be brought as language to that language. The idea is Martin Heidegger's and it is concerned with our tendency to 'subsume language as a particular instance of this or that universal' rather than on its own terms as itself.[16] In the present discussion I think a concept like this can be applied attitudinally by exposing ourselves to the language simply as the language is and to how it affects us as we read it, willingly refraining from taking the further step that would assign a particular referent to the events or people that would be grounded in the writer's point of view. By disassociating the words from their source we free them to take on the kinds of purely phenomenological interpretations that such phrases as 'To me this means…'or 'This makes me think about…' indicate, interpretations that are personal, emotional, and bound to the moment – the moment of appreciation. We might further augment such a stance by taking the approach to truth that John D. Caputo suggests, wherein truth itself is not viewed as an immovable and purely empirical entity but rather as something that is time and situation-bound, shifting, transforming, continually becoming.[17] If the very idea of truth can be loosened in such a way then the 'true meaning' of a piece suddenly loses its vigorous dominance over us and our self-made restraints seem to fall away. It is naturally impossible for the words in a poem to begin from a fully meaning free point as a language is, as stated, a shared system of reference, but what I mean to suggest is that we do not pin our understanding and interpretation of an artwork to its source but rather allow each to hinge on our own appreciation, which in turn is based on the emotional response that it elicits in us at that time and only for that moment. Gazing at a print or painting that one owns and sees regularly can be like this: each day brings a new response to the work when we take the time to allow ourselves to have a response; in the same way we look afresh at each piece irrespective of genre, school, type, or any degree of classification. In order to enhance and fully open up our appreciation we divorce the art from the artist.

5. Final thoughts

The argument for a personally generated, personally held, personally emotive and time sensitive appreciation that

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[16] Martin Heidegger, 'The Way to Language', in *Basic Writings: Key Selections from Being and Time to The Task of Thinking,* ed. by David Farrell Krell and for. by Taylor Carman (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 397-426 (p. 406).

[17] John D. Caputo, *Truth* (London: Penguin Books, 2013).

has been made in the above might seem to be far too relative to be of much use for art critics or theorists but my concern here is not with them. It is, rather, with all of us average laypeople for whom art is important and who wish to interact with it in a rewarding manner. To know facts and data about a piece of art may be intellectually stimulating and may well provoke further interest and promote inquiry into both it and its related works; such knowledge does and should continue to have an important place in our societies and in our lives. I do not mean to argue that learning about art has no place whatsoever; instead I wish to propose that in our responses, as non-experts, to an artwork we move from an appreciation that is based primarily on understanding and on getting the 'right' interpretation to one where that order is reversed, where we start from our own internal response to a piece – at that time – and then if we are so motivated we thereafter move towards the epistemic. We do not begin by 'knowing' a work we 'feel' it, and we do that by first feeling our way into it, living it, inhabiting its world. We become us in it, and it becomes a part of us in the manner by which it moves us. If we can take on such an approach we may also find that far more of the art world is suddenly available to us, ready and waiting to be appreciated, no prerequisites required; surely that would be a result welcome to both artists and art lovers alike.

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